

# Touching the ineffable: Collective creative collaboration, education and the secular-spiritual in performing arts

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## Abstract

*This article considers a range of spiritual, psychological and pedagogical writing to examine whether the contemporary notion of ‘secular-spirituality’ can move forward our understanding of collaborative working processes in the performing arts. With reference to Anttila, Bigger, Bini, Czikszenmihalyi, Lave and Wenger, James, Roff, and Van Ness, the article focuses on the rehearsal room interplay of life world and social world through three key notions. These are ‘embodied knowing’, ‘bodily intelligence’ and ‘belonging’ in relation to the individual in the wider collaborative process. Some working practices of Forced Entertainment – as discussed by Tim Etchells – are then considered as a concluding and practice-based referent.*

## Keywords

secular-spiritual  
education  
spiritual development  
optimal experience  
collaborative practice  
collective creative collaboration  
devising

## **The secular-spiritual and education**

I believe that there are not two separate worlds, the spiritual and the material, and that it is useless to set them apart. They are two aspects of one and the same universe; as it is useless to oppose the soul and the body. (Beigbeder cited in Gide [1949] 1971)

Monica Bini (2009) suggests the spiritual is ‘better experienced than explained’ and in the performing arts we probably sense this to be true whenever our practice draws us both out of ourselves and yet deeper within ourselves. Jayne Stevens (2012) reminds us that ‘spirituality’ derives from the Latin word *spiritus*, generally translated as ‘breathing’ or ‘air’, related to spirit as, ‘the animating or vital principle in man’ (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2011). Recent literature certainly reflects a pluralized ‘spiritualities’ rather than a singular construct, thereby embracing a range of traditional, postmodernist and constructivist ideologies and frameworks.

Amanda Williamson remarks on spirituality as ‘a contentious subject, ... [which]... is fostered in many different disciplines and explored through various paradigms’ (2010: 37) and as Gide points out above, the spiritual and the secular are always intertwined. In this article I would like to echo Peter Van Ness (the biostatistician and doctor of divinity) when he cautiously remarked of his own

work that 'hypotheses about the nature of secular spirituality offered here will not be dogmatically asserted nor will they be proleptically substantiated' (Van Ness 1992: 68). I simply hope to provide a backdrop for further discussion.

When we talk of secular spirituality, we refer to a spiritual ideology that is not necessarily an affirmation of religious belief but may encompass practices similar to those found in a sacred spiritual discourse (Crossman 2003). About a fifth of people in the United Kingdom currently describe themselves as spiritual but not religious (De Castella 2013). Williamson goes on to remark that the sacred discourse floats freely within a range of generally secular contexts, such as education and artistic expression and here the example of Rudolf Steiner's work has some potency.

In the early twentieth century Steiner's 'spiritual science' led to Eurythmy, an expressive movement developed with his wife Maria von Sivers. Furthermore, Steiner moved on to develop his own education philosophy and approach based on what he termed 'Anthroposophy', a spiritual path focusing on freedom of the individual person: a path that embraces the inner connection with self and his or her relationship to the outer world. The Steiner approach centres upon enabling the individual to find his or her own creativity, and self-expression in order to find direction in life (Stedall 2012, documentary film clip). Although Steiner's educational legacy has only been acknowledged in pockets here in the United

Kingdom, the outcomes of *The Cambridge Primary Review* report in 2009 proved supportive of the various Steiner schools inspected from 2006 to 2008. Indeed, with a state funded academy in Herefordshire, another school in Frome and plans for other 'free-school' academies in the future, the Steiner-Waldorf School model may be making in-roads after years of being sidelined. It is certainly the case that spiritual development in education has taken time to find a broader more secular perspective.

The National Curriculum Council in 1993 circulated a discussion paper that moved to 'guide schools' towards a greater understanding of students' moral and spiritual development as a broader part of teaching and learning in schools; an effort to see spiritual development as not solely aligned or synonymous with religion. In 2013, the UK Department for Education suggested that students' spiritual development is in part about developing their own capability to achieve. The Government document (Department of Education 2013) suggests that they develop an inquisitive sensibility and understanding of life around them whilst they develop and learn the attributes and responses to kindle their sense of inner self and non-material 'well-being'. The earlier 'Melbourne declaration on educational goals for young Australians' from 2008, similarly argued that spiritual well-being (alongside emotional, mental and physical well-being) is vital in developing a young person's capacity to have a sense of self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity; 'the concepts of being, belonging and becoming' (Bini 2009: 3). This supports Jungian philosophy in that we have a

drive to become attached to the world from the day we are born, a need for belonging, which is deeply rooted in the spiritual.

These reports share and reflect Bini's belief that students can be encouraged to explore 'facets of the spiritual' in the various subjects and disciplines an education curriculum provides (2009: 3). Like Steiner, Bini believes in 'developing students capacity to engage with and express the ineffable, for example in powerful literary and visual metaphors and other non-verbal means of expression such as dance, or design and creative process' (Bini 2009: 3). Crucially, however, Bini goes on to suggest that '... spiritualities are deeply rooted in, and reflective of, the material world' (Williamson 2010: 39). This reaffirmation of the secular-spiritual, in the rooting of the spiritual in the material, opens the debate for a more conventional developmental psychological approach to spiritual intelligence through the ideas of, for example, Howard Gardner and Mihail Csikszentmihalyi. Gardner (1999: 59) is initially sceptical of 'spiritual intelligence' with 'its privileged but unsubstantiated claims with regard to truth value, and the need for it to be partially identified through its effect on other people'. He suggests it would be more appropriate to 'carve out that area of spirituality closest "in spirit" to the other intelligences' and then align this to 'naturalist intelligence'. This is suggestive of Csikszentmihalyi's accounts of 'optimal experience' wherein people become so engaged in what they are doing that they enter a trance-like state or 'flow', a total immersion and complete absorption in a particular, focused activity.

Both Gardner and Csikszentmihalyi enable the reincorporation of Van Ness' notion of our spirituality possessing 'an outer and an inner complexion' (Van Ness 1992: 68). The 'facing outward' concept embraces our human existence as part of the physical and social world that he terms 'an intentional object of thought and feeling', whereas the 'facing inward' construct looks to the experiential self '... structured by experiences of sudden self-transformation and subsequent gradual development' (Van Ness 1992: 69). Van Ness goes on to suggest that the spiritual 'is the quest for attaining an optimal relationship between what one truly is and everything that is; it is a quest that can be promoted by apt regimens of disciplined behaviour' (Van Ness 1992: 69). In the performing arts, where the nature of artistic practice is in the actual doing, in the experience of creating and performing work, it should come as no surprise that we already possess many and varied regimens of disciplined behaviour. I suggest it is the case that these regimens can facilitate this sense of belonging between 'what one is and everything that is' and – importantly for this discussion – we utilize such regimens to attain a more embodied sensibility and consequent spiritual experience.

In a further consideration of the relationship between spirituality and artistic expression, Painter (2007) has reflected on Frankl's earlier conception of the search for meaning as a 'primary motivational force' and begins to draw together the spiritual, the psychological, and the artistic. For both Frankl and Painter,

meaning is the foundation stone from which two areas of thought proceed. First: 'in our search for meaning we discover a hunger for something that is beyond the limits of our capacity to fully describe in language' (Painter 2007: 1). These felt and sensed 'ways of knowing' remain in some sense elusive, beyond naming. Second: the journey towards seeking 'meaning and relationship to mystery' is undertaken by 'entering more deeply into this through a set of practices or disciplines' (Painter 2007: 1–2). As well as the obvious connection to Van Ness, there is in these remarks something of the legacy of William James, the American psychologist and philosopher who discussed 'mystical psychologies' as part of his 1901–1902 Gifford Lectures on 'The Varieties of Religious Experience'. James outlined the position of self and offered a psychological perspective to the study of human nature. As Stephen Bigger (2008) points out this 'gave a focus to personal (rather than institutional) religion' thereby paving the way for postmodern interpretations of spirituality. Bigger sees in James' work the idea that our spiritual 'feelings' are rooted in the unconscious, the inner self, 'the backdrop for the conscious rational mind' (Bigger 2008: 60–61). This reaffirms Van Ness' understanding of our relation to the world around us, the importance of a sense of belonging, and the sense of meaning we find in that relationship.

James described four characteristics: 'noetic quality' (our knowledge and understanding of experience); 'ineffability' – the failure of language in relation to feeling; the 'transient' – whereby the quality of experience fades into memory;

and finally the 'passive' whereby we remit control to a Higher Power. I would like to suggest a further parallel between these 'mystical psychologies' and Proust's notion of 'involuntary memory' whereby a physical action and sensation may prompt an emotive recollection. This seems to happen when our autobiographical presences – which we inevitably bring to structures of making and performing (those regimens of disciplined behaviour) – seem to liberate moments of memory. The associated recollection of 'event images' can certainly be involuntary as Tukey (1969) illustrates and this very quality can imbue them with a further sense of the mystical and spiritual.

At this point I will introduce a more broadly ethnographic sense of social world to the preceding personal 'life world' emphasis. The position of the social construct within this debate is a key, given our reliance on others in the making of artistic performance work. Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave (1991) have used the term 'communities of practice' to describe a process of social learning when a group of people with a common interest share their views and ideas over time to develop a shared practice together. In comparing domains of practice Wenger presented the notion that people learn and get better at what they do if they 'interact regularly' (1998). This is not surprising, but Wenger breaks down and analyses some of the processes he believes to be in operation. Collaboration gives a sense of belonging and an enhanced sense of engagement in the formation of a group identity. This allows a shared imagination to develop which, in turn, heightens the sense of group alignment and cohesion. In these favourable



conditions the idea of embodied sensibilities and knowledge can flourish and for many artists, of course, the idea of embodied sensibility is the connecting tissue between the social world and the life world. This engagement of the inner self in relation to practice and collective creative collaboration is a reaching of 'embodied knowing' (Anttila 2003), a reaching of 'bodily intelligence' (Gardner [1983] 2004) and a reaching of 'belonging' that characterizes a sense of spiritual well-being.

### **Collaborative practice**

As Montiel-Overall illustrates, the constituent elements of collaboration can include: 'friendliness, congeniality, collegiality, reciprocity, respect, propensity to share (shared vision, shared thinking and shared problem-solving, the shared creation of integrated instruction), trust, flexibility, and communication' (2005: 17). How might these attributes of collaboration map on to 'apt regimens of disciplined behaviour' in order to enhance the 'embodied sensibilities' and sense of 'belonging' discussed above? We may suspect that collaboration makes us better at collaborative practice, and we want to enhance that capacity because it is both functional and satisfying. It is functional because we can solve some kinds of problems as teams that we may not solve alone, satisfying because it enables us to demonstrate and perform our social nature. The former is utilitarian, the latter may be secular-spiritual, and both form part of an artistic

process. In the higher education context we engage in collaborative practice on a number of levels, both organizational and creative. In 2011 a survey on *Collaborative Art Practices in HE: Mapping and Developing Pedagogical Models*, Alix et al. (2011) outlined the position and ‘values’ of collaborative practices (Jamieson 2011: 31–38) within performing arts higher education. The evidence suggested a range of common principles and skills from building trust, communication, team working, creativity, risk-taking, problem-solving and decision-making through to important values giving meaning and purpose, largely aligning with Montiel-Overall’s ‘attributes’.

Some of the evidence in the report suggests that ‘collaboration is primarily a process of learning how to engage the self with others’ (Jamieson 2011: 15). It indicated ‘the sensitivity and responsibility of this dual position where the student is simultaneously “I” and “we”... in a group project’ (Alix et al. 2011: 23). This parallels Van Ness’s ‘inward facing’ and ‘outward facing’ dimensions of a secular spiritual discourse within a socially dependent context. Work by Lave and Wenger on the formation of a socially constructed situation explores a community of practice whereby the collaborators engage on the levels of tacit and explicit functions. They say it concerns ‘... conventions, subtle cues, untold rules of thumb’, to ‘specific perceptions, well-tuned sensitivities, embodied understandings, underlying assumption and shared world views’ (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998: 47). These attributes create a shared identity and sense of belonging through a practice. Keith Sawyer clarifies: ‘When members of

a group have been together for a while, they share a common language and common set of unspoken understandings' (2007: 51).

This idea of 'being together for a while' is important. Time in a shared creative process has to allow for play, accident (Kaplow Applebaum 2012) and failure (Bharucha 2012; Etchells 2012b; McKinnon and Lowry 2012; O'Gorman and Werry 2012). The nature of devising needs space and time to allow for the experimentation, uncertainty and unexpectedness that is part and parcel of a creative process, and the benefits of building in space and time can be considerable. Bates (2012), for example, has illustrated that working in groups to create music heightens creativity, group identity and trust. Like Wenger, Bates emphasizes that shared identity is a consequence of sharing ideas, trying things out, exploring and discovering with peers, gaining confidence in taking chances and innovating. Sawyer (2007) puts forward the case that creative innovation is reliant on group collaboration. He uses studies from theatre and jazz music improvisation to exemplify that 'flow' emerges in group-centred activity. 'Group flow is a peak experience, a group performing at its top level of ability' (Sawyer 2007: 43). He asserts that 'innovation emerges from the bottom up, unpredictably and improvisationally'. It 'can't be planned, it can't be predicted; it has to be allowed to emerge' (Sawyer 2007: 25).

The growth in collectives and collaborative performance groups and companies during the 1970s and early 1980s across a range of disciplines and fields of practice was a prolific reflection of this yearning. Historically, this radical stance against hierarchical art-making structures favoured collective, democratic creative processes. McKean draws on Kempe to summarize: ‘... collaborative composition is often referred to as devising. Devising is a term used to refer to work that “has grown out of a group’s combined imagination, skill and effort”’ (Kempe 2000: 64 in McKean 2007: 503). Vera John-Steiner (2000) suggests we share and learn as mutual appropriation, and identifies and counterpoints the complementary and integrative patterns of collaboration. In the former each collaborator stays within their own disciplinary and experiential parameters, and a division of labour is established whereby their efforts complement each other. Within the integrative pattern both collaborators develop a new or hybrid construct as a result of shared thinking, ideas and beliefs that come about through sustained engagement together, by way of dialogue, risk-taking and shared vision (John-Steiner 2000: 203). The degree to which the ‘sharing’ is exerted is dependent upon the level or balance of partnership between the collaborators. This is also dependent upon the rules of engagement and ‘contract’ between the parties concerned. Mermikides and Smart (2010) suggest that devising has become a standard part of higher education performing arts practice. They point out that in higher education we are showing students that plurality, diversity and difference are acceptable

(Mermikides and Smart 2010) and hopefully we give students the opportunities to experience a variety of both complementary and integrative devising processes (Alix et al. 2011).

To briefly summarize: through these creative processes, 'we are drawn out of ourselves and yet deeper within ourselves' (Bini 2009: 1). Van Ness' idea of the 'inward facing', James's suggestion of 'mystical psychologies' and Tukey's musings on 'involuntary recollection' are deeply rooted in the interplay of the personal with a shared creative artistic process. These discussions of collaborative practice go some way to suggest that the invisible (or 'tacit') of successful collective creative collaboration is perhaps not far removed from the ineffable of spirituality. In Catriona Scott's 'Assessing the invisible' paper, from the Assessing Group Practice project funded by HEFCE's Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) 2002 – 2004, 'seeks to interrogate some of the different levels of "invisibility" present within interdisciplinary collaboration, and how these might be made manifest and tangible' in student work. Scott (2004) talks about what is 'shared between' the disciplines and how the 'space between' the disciplines can disappear. Crossing these boundaries and entering these spaces moves us into a Foucaultian territory wherein we see differences and equalities across discursive formations. When artists form intense collaborations by working closely together they find 'mutual zones of proximal development' (Moran and John-Steiner 2003: 83). There is a process of behavioural maturing towards

one another as the collaboration develops. Furthermore, Lynne Roff states (2003) in her M.A. thesis (around the same time as her book publication) that the creative process is about 'diving into the unknown' through a 'cycle of transformation' through 'encounter, release, and manifestation'. It is a continuous loop that allows 'mounting intensity' within an artist in each creative experience over time. There is a constant interplay in creative collaboration between the 'I' and the 'we' informed by time and place and the ways in which they play on conscious and involuntary memory.

### **Devising – Learning and developing in process**

I will now consider the devising work of Forced Entertainment in order to draw together some of my earlier points. In a 2010 press release for *The Thrill of it All* the company outlines that 'Forced Entertainment's trademark collaborative process – devising work as a group through improvisation, experimentation and debate – has made them pioneers of British avant-garde theatre' (Forced Entertainment 2010a) (Forced Entertainment 2010b). What follows is an April 2012 snapshot of company member Tim Etchells' responses to the company's devising process as recalled in a Skype link-up at the Prague Quadrennial symposium. He recalled memories of the previous few weeks in rehearsal, of being in the rehearsal room, of the importance of the room that the improvisations have inhabited. (As Harrop (2012) has noted, 'memories of rehearsal are [may be] stronger than a memory of performance'.) The rehearsal

process for Forced Entertainment's then new show (at that point there was no title) was half way through when Etchells chose to speak of 'middles':

Middles are more nebulous spaces. The longer the time a performance is, the longer it takes to connect with 'middles'. The potential depths of the 'middle' space is never far from the agents of our own lives... in the rehearsal room we are imagining unfoldings of time. (2012a)

Etchells describes a devising process specific to time and place: the 'doing' in a particular place. He speaks of the room, and the interactions, reactions and sensations between and from the people in that room, in time. There is a constant gathering of ideas and exploring from past (memories), voluntary and involuntary, actions and understanding, tacit and explicit, a process by all involved, performing together in a particular place and time, a unique creative 'space' as a community of practice. The notion of play and accident, being in 'group flow', of diving into the unknown, forms the heart of Forced Entertainments' work both in rehearsal and in the performance itself. The boundary between rehearsal and performance is porous. Moran and John-Steiner exemplify that when participating in a creative process 'people weave together the transformation of the known and the new into social forms' (2003: 72), the reliance on being able to play, fantasize and imagine is found in Forced Entertainment's rehearsal experience. In an improvised, collaborating framework

that is open and non-linear, a video camera records the various moments, actions, interactions and dialogue as it unfolds. The group of performers in the rehearsal room play and discover.

Less a case of narrative structure than an art form based on the dynamic deployment of pictorial and non-pictorial elements across the surface of a stage, building layers, contrasts, echoes, repetitions over duration, or simply: the structured unfolding of text, action and image over time, or simply: doing time. Pure dramaturgy. Making shape out of seconds. (Etchells 2009: 96)

Often their work goes through stages of order, communal adherence and unity to 'chaos, social fragmentation the chaotic, the unruly' or conversely 'starting with the unruly, the over the top, the impossible' to 'entropic decay to stillness [to] collapse of the theatrical' (Etchells 2009: 77), thereby revealing the stark reality of the 'people underneath'. The performers are often laid bare and their 'acting' becomes a reality dispelling the myth of theatrical convention. Such illustration of 'self' in relation to 'other' is not just in the performance material, not simply in the relationship of the performers' actions. 'The stage is not so much a sequence as a tangle of diverse intentions. A threading, mirroring, echoing, space; a dramaturgy of knots, collisions, tangles' (Etchells 2009: 78). When watching a Forced Entertainment show, confusion, calm and mystery can sit side by side.



Etchells sees many possible shows, many uses, but no 'endings'. He says 'we come to these decisions in process... we allow the material in performance to make decisions. It is a dance of what is and what might be' (2012a). There are many actions and reactions through improvisations based on explicit and tacit knowing, each enactment leading to another enactment and another, and so on, until the performers are in flow – a group flow – an optimal experience within themselves and with each other. The members of Forced Entertainment have been working together for some 25 years and have developed a trusting and prolonged engagement with each other as a community of practice. They have developed their own practice and a group practice, shared vision and shared growth (John-Steiner 2000: 188). Above all else they certainly seem to trust each other in the process of exploring, encountering and building theatrical work. They are able to utilize an integrative model to enter a new 'space' together. Furthermore, there seem no conventional limits for Forced Entertainment. The performers create and adapt, alter and transform in devising. Their shared identity, their sense of belonging, forms as they engage, imagine and align (Wenger 1998) in the moment, in process. They shift in and out of various discipline conventions: acting, movement, dance and song, employing and creating the surreal and the make-believe, the mystical (to recall William James) and the real. The creative palette is open, free and diverse. The performers play and build like children, employing imagination and sensing no boundaries, recalling the principles of Steiner's work of free expression and empowerment of the individual learner. The 'autobiographical presences' that I talked about earlier

are manifest in the devising work of Forced Entertainment as they develop an ongoing regimen of disciplined behaviour to liberate imagination, expression and moments of memory.

There is an urge to create and find endless possibilities. As Painter (2007) has illustrated, creativity is a powerful shaping force in human life. It is an intangible human capacity of a transcendent nature – it moves us beyond ourselves' into an immersion in and within the making process – the state of being in 'flow'. My understanding suggests there is cycle of development within each rehearsal, each show and each performance. The performers are learning more about themselves and their relationship to each other in the group and the world around them. Roff's cycle, or loop of transformation in the creative process, reinforces spiritual experience associated with a metaphorical idea of 'a sense of constant movement and progression' (Painter 2007: 4).

The quality of ineffability of a secular-spiritual experience in artistic, group collaboration emanates from experiencing. It is through a collaborative creative process in making artistic work with others (whether in the rehearsal room or onstage) that 'we may begin to notice stirrings within ourselves – resistance, insight, joy, sadness — all of which are food for self-insight and spiritual growth' (Painter 2007: 4). The performers in Forced Entertainment's work are in a constant cycle of learning more about themselves and each other in relation to the 'I' and the 'we'. Each encounter is a development from a manifestation of

actions, reactions and transformations in space and time. The secular-spiritual dimension is intrinsically bound with a deeper sense of self and others within prolonged group or collective creative collaboration. The force that drives the collective dimension of creative collaboration is that 'taking risks, buoyed by collaborative support, contributes to a developing, changing self' (John-Steiner 2000: 188). And 'through collaboration we can transcend the constraints of biology, of time, and achieve a fuller self, beyond the limitations and the talents of the individual' (John-Steiner 2000: 188). It is my impression that Forced Entertainment as a living community of practice has evolved a way of working that gets close to the secular-spiritual.

## **Conclusion**

Of course there are various working methods in the devising of theatre, dance or music. The focus of this article had not been to present a variety of performing arts case studies or even models of group-led creative practices, but rather to suggest that creative collaboration in the performing arts has a secular-spiritual dimension. Any sustained collective creative collaboration where people learn and develop as a community of practice will both be framed by, and constitute, their own social context. A secular-spiritual dimension to that context will be characterized by a shared sense of belonging and oneness. As Roff states, as cited in Zimmer and Campbell ([1956] 1993: 262), 'Artists are engaged in a quest for spiritual evolution, the integration of the self, and the ongoing creation of our

world' (Roff 2003: 68). And that understanding, without doubt, should be a pedagogical imperative.

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